

Opening Statement of Chairman Dan Burton

Subcommittee on Human Rights & Wellness Hearing

“The Future Challenges of Autism: A Survey of the Ongoing Initiatives in the Federal Government to Address the Epidemic.”

November 20, 2003

The Subcommittee is convening today to further examine increases in the occurrences of autism in the United States, and to discuss the ways in which the Federal government is providing services and financial assistance to autistic individuals and their families today, and to learn more about their plans to deal with this growing epidemic in the future.

Only 15 years ago, Autism was considered a relatively rare disease, affecting roughly 1 in 10,000 children. Since then, the growing rates of Autism are reaching epic proportions in this country.

Currently, conservative estimates of Autism rates in the United States indicate that 1 in every 500 children are afflicted with these various spectrum disorders, while scientific studies reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* have observed Autism rates of 1 in every 150 children, and the problem just continues to escalate. In fact, Autism has now become the third most common developmental disability – even more prevalent than Down’s syndrome and childhood cancers.

According to a study released earlier this year by the California Department of Developmental Services (DDS) it was reported that the number of cases of Autism in the

State increased from 10,377 cases in 1998 to 20,377 cases by December 2002. That means the caseload in California alone nearly doubled in a little more than 4 years!

This explosive growth in rates of autism has not merely been observed in California, but in States all across the country, and shows no sign of slowing down.

Today, it is reported that there are more than 1.5 million individuals in this Nation afflicted with Autism, and if the incidence rates of these disorders continue to increase, it is conceivable that the number of autistic children in America could reach 4 million in the next decade!

That is why I initiated an in-depth investigation into the Autism epidemic over four years ago during my tenure as Chairman of the Full Committee on Government Reform here in the U.S. House of Representatives. That initial investigation led to several Committee hearings, bi-partisan legislative proposals, and educational Congressional briefings on Autism for Members and staff.

In addition, various Federal agencies in the United States have also rightfully begun to acknowledge the present and future public health implications of the autism epidemic, and are currently conducting and funding research into the causation and frequency of these disorders.

In an effort to better coordinate the efforts of the United States health agencies in response to Autism, the 'Children's Health Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-310)' established an Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC). The Committee's primary mission is to facilitate the efficient and effective exchange of information on autism activities among the member agencies, and to better coordinate their autism-related programs and initiatives.

Today, approximately \$10 Billion a year is spent on these Federal projects related to Autism, including research, training for the teachers of Autistic individuals, and financial assistance to help families with the great financial burdens associated with caring for family members afflicted with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, and if the upward trends of Autism continue, budgetary impact could increase 40-fold to over \$400 Billion in Federal monies spent per year by 2013.

Today, the Subcommittee has the privilege of hearing from The Honorable Peter Van Dyck, Associate Administrator from the Office of Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who will be testifying on the current programs and financial assistance that his office is providing to help families with Autistic individuals.

In 2001, President Bush pledged to “leave no child behind”, promising that every child in America should have the opportunity to receive a first-rate education. In an effort to fulfill this promise, the U.S. Department of Education is currently testing programs that would help to better train teachers who educate children with Autism. Ms. Ilene Schwartz, Director of the Center for Training Personnel to Provide Evidence-based Educational Services to Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, is here today to explain these exciting educational initiatives.

In addition to these Federal initiatives in response to the Autism epidemic, there are several non-governmental and private institutions providing treatments that have been shown to improve the health and well-being of autistic children. Mr. Rick Rollens, Co-Founder of the M.I.N.D. Institute at the University of California-Davis, and Dr. Stephen Edelson, Director of the Edelson Center for Environmental and Preventative Medicine,

will testify before the Subcommittee today to explain the therapies that their institutions have found to be of great usefulness in treating children with Autism.

I firmly believe that if we do not take immediate steps to reverse the ever-increasing trend of growth in autism cases, we will be passing on a tremendous burden of responsibility in caring and providing for the autistic community to future generations of Americans. That is simply not acceptable.

It is my sincere hope that the Federal government and independent researchers will find new and exciting ways to work together to once and for all find the root cause of Autism Spectrum Disorders, and to prevent this epidemic from harming more of our children.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. They deserve our thanks and full support as they lead the daily battle against this terrible affliction.